Reading Shelley

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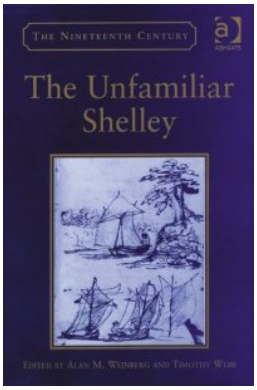
I am fond, to put it mildly, of many poets, but Shelley – since I was 14 or 15 or so -- has always held and always will hold a special place in my affections. Let me start with some generalities and readings, then talk a little about my work on him. Shelley, for me, is a poet of movement, process, and subtle, swift changes of mood. 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' combines hope with sceptical doubt, its ideal 'a dying flame' set against 'darkness'. 'Ode to the West Wind', with incomparable poignancy, asserts poetic creativity to be a matter of 'Ashes and sparks'. *Adonais* celebrates 'the abode where the Eternal are', but it also presents the poet himself as 'borne darkly, fearfully, afar'. For me, Shelley has always been a poet of conflicting perspectives, able to strike a note of resilience when on the verge of despair, of sober realism in the midst of rapture. And all this in forms that are beautiful, dynamic, original, musical, endlessly open to interpretative responses. His poems are never content, even with discontent; they unweave and weave again, stitch and unstitch themselves, reorchestrate, start again, question their resolutions. They turn from confident statement to interrogation; they deconstruct their own tropes and figures; they play mood against mood, Narrator against Visionary, spirit against spirit, genre against genre. Yet whatever mood they're in, they have a joyous delight in the discoveries of the shaping imagination, almost an upper air that streams above the apparent theme of the poem.



Here he is in a letter, written on June 18, 1822, when he has twenty more days to live. In this letter to John Gisborne, Shelley writes what has always struck me as one of the great prose poems in the Romantic period – and I should add that the idea of reading his prose as a form of the highest imaginative achievement has always beguiled me (it resulted in an essay on his translations of the *Symposium* and the *Ion* which I published in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, edited by Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Ashgate, 2009)). The letter begins by describing how he has saved Mary from dying of bleeding following a 'severe miscarriage': 'I took the most decisive resolutions, by dint of making her sit in ice, I succeeded in checking the hemorrhage and the fainting fits'. It moves on to his concern about Ollier and the poems lodged with him. Of 'Epipsychidion', he remarks with a grimace: 'the person whom it celebrates was a cloud instead of a Juno'.

And suddenly an underlying logic proposes itself: Shelley is not exactly taking a last look, but he is bidding farewell one by one to people he has loved. 'Epipsychidion' he now sees as a poem that sums up, in 'idealized' form, his habit of idealizing. In a moment of guarded, affecting revelation, he says: 'I think one is always in love with something or other', the jokiness of 'something or other' unable wholly to blunt the strangely cheerful yet also mournful sense of destiny in 'I think one is always in love'. The reason for mournfulness is the inevitability of making a category mistake: 'The error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal'. 'Error' it may have been, but it is the 'generous error' of which the Preface to *Alastor* speaks; the looking always to confuse boundaries, to find 'in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal' is the mainspring of Shelley's poetry. The letter is playful, and enjoys its references to Hogg's anti-idealistic teasing and joshing. Hogg adapts a quotation from Horace's *Ars Poetica* about the ability to use common words with dignity to the suggestion that Shelley had made something 'honoris' out of something quite vulgar. This is a poet who is equal to those with a counter-vision, able to dismiss with 'supreme indifference' the latest gossip which will, he predicts, make Byron 'half mad'.

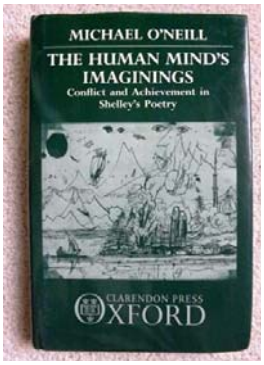
There may be a kind of serenity here, but there is also loneliness. After hoping that the Gisbornes and perhaps

Hogg would join him, Shelley almost casually tears a veil from his mind: 'I only feel the want of those who can feel, and understand me'. Mary is one, who, for whatever reason, does not, and Shelley seems half to sympathize with her predicament. He then turns to the solace offered by Jane and Edward Williams, and moves easily from the expense of the boat to its promise of escape: 'it is swift and beautiful, and appears quite a vessel', he writes of the boat whose sea-unworthiness may have been a reason for his untimely death: 'Williams is captain, and we drive along this delightful bay in the evening wind' – one notices how the syntax has grown unshackled and energized; all is heading towards a transformative 'until': 'until earth appears another world'. But the conditional comes back, even as the previously mocked impulse to idealize returns with a knowing, delighted and sombre vengeance: 'Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, "Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful"'. So Shelleyan the rhythm there, one that combines onward momentum, covert yearning and a latent sense of the tragedy likely to be coiled inside all pursuits of desire, here suggested by the allusion to *Faust*. Faust, of course, says words to this effect: 'may I be damned whenever I say to the passing moment, Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful'.

Certainly if obscurely the letter -- with its abysses and ascents ('I stand, as it were, upon a precipice, which I have ascended with great, and cannot descend without *greater*, peril and I am content if the heaven above me is calm for the passing moment') --- has spiritual kinship with the fusion of moods at work in the poem Shelley was composing at the time, *The Triumph of Life*. This poem operates between states and at thresholds, set on the 'sunlit limits of the night'. In it, the drive towards unveiling new potentialities continually undermines itself and yet possibly salvages something from its own self-wreckage. Everything tends towards erasures and cancellations; the reader wonders whether these cancellations and erasure may prefigure new inscriptions. Shelley does not wholly surrender to loss. His *terza rima* may lay bare a winding path that mimes a swift journey into a present-day purgatorial underworld. But it also bears witness to artistic power and energy.

Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* is something of a gospel for my own thinking about poetry; the act of transcribing it with sedulous care syllable by syllable for various editorial commissions may have helped to engrave it on my brain, but it has always seemed to me a decisive, foundational text. Enduring insights from it for me are the view that poetry is 'vitally metaphorical' and that, in being so, it supplies a model for creative thought. In effect, Shelley turns the question 'What is the value of poetry?' on its head and asserts that 'Poetry is the source of value'.

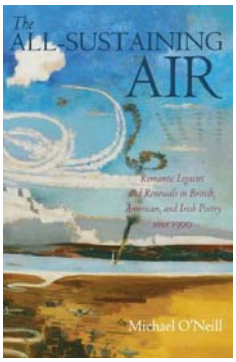
Poetry is that activity of verbal making and imaginative shaping that charges and re-charges language with meaning.



My own emphasis in writing about poetry has often been evaluative, though evaluation tempered with something close to empathy and valuing, in particular, that ethical quality which Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch call 'attention'. My first critical book was on Shelley, *The Human Mind's Imaginings* (OUP, 1989); it sought to find a way of praising his finest poems, not for their expression of ideas, but for their dramatization of often conflicting feelings and thought. It was especially interested in Shelley's own exploration of poetry's uniqueness; as his career develops, an answer evolves that has much to do with trust in unparaphrasable 'imaginings', to use his own word from the close of *Mont Blanc*.

Not all fine poetry will answer to this criterion of unparaphrasable imaginings, but a surprising amount will. That's to say, poetry confers on its own images and metaphors and linguistic procedures an authority that is unique. My interest in this authority fed into my second OUP monograph, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (1997), which argues that poetry for the Romantics becomes a form of knowing conducted on its own terms and with no little anxiety, though on my argument such anxiety – by being built dramatically into the poetry – is aesthetically productive. Shelley, the subject of two chapters, one a wide-ranging account of his poetry, the other focusing on *The Sensitive Plant,* is a vital presence in the book. It argues that poetic form is the principal means through which a mode of knowing is communicated; form is never simply that which clothes; it is that which shapes and animates. I have grown increasingly captivated by the contribution made by poetic form to poetry, as is evident in my *Poetic Form* (CUP 2012), co-authored with Michael D. Hurley, and, indeed, in my notes on Shelley (and other poets) in *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Blackwell, 2007), co-edited with Charles Mahoney, and my editorial contributions to volume III of *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)

I have also grown increasingly interested in literary history, questions of legacy, allusion and influence, all of which are central to Shelley, a poet who rarely embarks on a project without revising an earlier poetic precursor: from Wordsworth in *Alastor,* through Aeschylus and Milton in *Prometheus Unbound*, to Dante and Petrarch in *The Triumph of Life*. Relevant publications include (as editor and contributor) *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (CUP, 2010) and *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, Irish and American Poetry since 1900* (OUP, 2007, paperbacked 2012), along with various essays. With Harold Bloom, I am fascinated by 'the hidden roads that go from poem to poem', and I respond very positively to Shelley's suggestion in *A Defence* that poetry's value is endlessly self-multiplying. A great poem goes on and on duplicating versions of itself and yet these versions have their own originality. It continues, always the same yet always changing, inspiring later readers in varying ways. Or as Shelley has it:



All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great Poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.

I am nearing completion of a book-length study that explores the 'new relations' present in and kindled by Shelley. My aim is to focus in detail on Shelley's gift for creative dialogue with predecessors and contemporaries, and, more briefly, on his significance for later nineteenth-century poetry and criticism. There will be chapters, among other things, on his response to poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Southey, and on the response to him of figures such as Hemans, Landon, Tennyson, and Swinburne. I am currently finishing my essay on Shelley and Swinburne, a poet whose work overflows with echoes of the Romantic poet, in the act of establishing its own unique voice. *Atalanta*, *Hertha*, *Anactoria*: all subject Shelley's tropes and rhythms and verse forms to new and surprising ends.

Even after editing (with Anthony Howe and with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan) *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (OUP, 2013), a wide-ranging collection of essays, I still feel how much more of Shelley there is to explore. Several lifetimes would not exhaust the riches of his work. I feel lucky to have spent so much of my adult life in the company of his remarkable intellect and imagination.